

David McLetchie – Merchiston Castle School

Headmaster's Assembly – 24th April 2007

I am very pleased to have such a distinguished school as Merchiston Castle in my Parliamentary constituency and very much hope that on 4th May I will still be able to say the same. This is not because I expect you to be relocated but because I hope that I will not be compulsorily relocated by the electors of Edinburgh Pentlands on polling day.

MSPs are employed on fixed term contracts for 4 years in the Scottish Parliament at the end of which over 60,000 people have the right to vote on whether you should be made redundant or not and this fairly concentrates the mind.

Today I want to say a few things about the democratic society in which we are fortunate to live in this country. Democracy is not a perfect system of government. It can be slow and inefficient. It can be disputatious and fractious. It can be contrary and lead to wild swings in policy from one government to the next and one year to the next. It isn't an organisational model that is found in businesses or dare I say it in schools. Students and pupils don't get to vote on who runs the school and I suppose Merchiston Castle is more in the nature of a benevolent dictatorship in the person of the headmaster.

Accordingly democracy is neither perfect nor widely copied in other spheres of life. However there are two very important things to remember about a democratic society.

Firstly, a democracy is not about electing a government – in the last analysis it is about throwing one out and letting the other side in. In a democracy you need good losers, parties who will hand over power gracefully as opposed to being forcibly removed from power. It is all very well to campaign as many have in the past for "one man one vote" but how often did this turn out to be "one man one vote once". Accordingly there are many false democracies which have turned into dictatorships – into one party states - and the present situation in Zimbabwe is a classic example of this. In that country it may be that some kind of military action or violent resistance is necessary at the end of the day to bring about a change of government rather than at an election.

The second point to remember is that democracy is not a particularly good system until you consider all the alternatives whether they be dictatorships, one party states, theocracies which is government by religious leaders or oligarchies where a small number of powerful families run a country on behalf of a dominant class or a dominant race. Accordingly when you look at these alternatives one realises that democracy is not so bad after all despite its faults.

However in this country there is one cloud hanging over the system and that is the level of participation. We have just seen the first round of voting in the

French presidential election. 84% of those eligible to vote did so and next week there will be a run off ballot between Monsieur Sarkozy and Madame Royal. It is over 50 years since we in Britain last achieved a turn out at that level. In the last Scottish Parliament elections in 2003 fewer than 50% of people voted – fortunately in my constituency it was the right 50% but nonetheless a poor level of turnout overall. In the General Election of 2005 the turn out was less than 60%. Many ask why is this the case but it is a question that as young people you should ask yourselves because the lowest level of participation in elections is among those most recently qualified to vote i.e. the 18 to 24 year olds and the highest level of participation is among the 60-70 year olds.

I have always found this surprising. I was desperate to vote for the first time. I regarded the right to vote as a rite of passage for a young person a bit like kissing your first girl. I am 54 years of age going on 55. I remember that the General Election in 1970 was held on June 18th which is Waterloo Day but my 18th birthday was not until August. I was very annoyed that I did not have the chance to vote because I was born 7 weeks too late and in fact had to wait until 1974 before I could vote for the first time in a General Election. Fortunately I did not have to wait for four years to kiss a girl.

More seriously we can reflect on the history of the 19th century and the campaign for male suffrage and the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1885, and in the early 20th century history think of the campaign for votes for women and the suffragette movement. In more recent times we have seen the extension of democracy to countries in Eastern Europe which were formerly in thrall to the Soviet Union and its communist regime and we also think of South Africa when black people obtained the right to vote for the first time and people walked for days and miles and queued for hours to cast their ballot. In this country we have many people who can't be bothered to take five minutes to walk round the corner to cast a vote in their local school or church hall.

A study of the history of the campaigns for the right to vote should inspire us but at the present time should also shame us and serve to shake us out of our complacency.

In conclusion let me repeat that democracy is not a perfect system, but is the best we've got and it's the best we are ever likely to get. This is to be a non partisan talk so I can't say to you today "vote for me". However I will say that whether it is on May 3rd or at some future election that you have the opportunity to vote for the first time, if you can't vote for me please make sure that you do vote for someone.